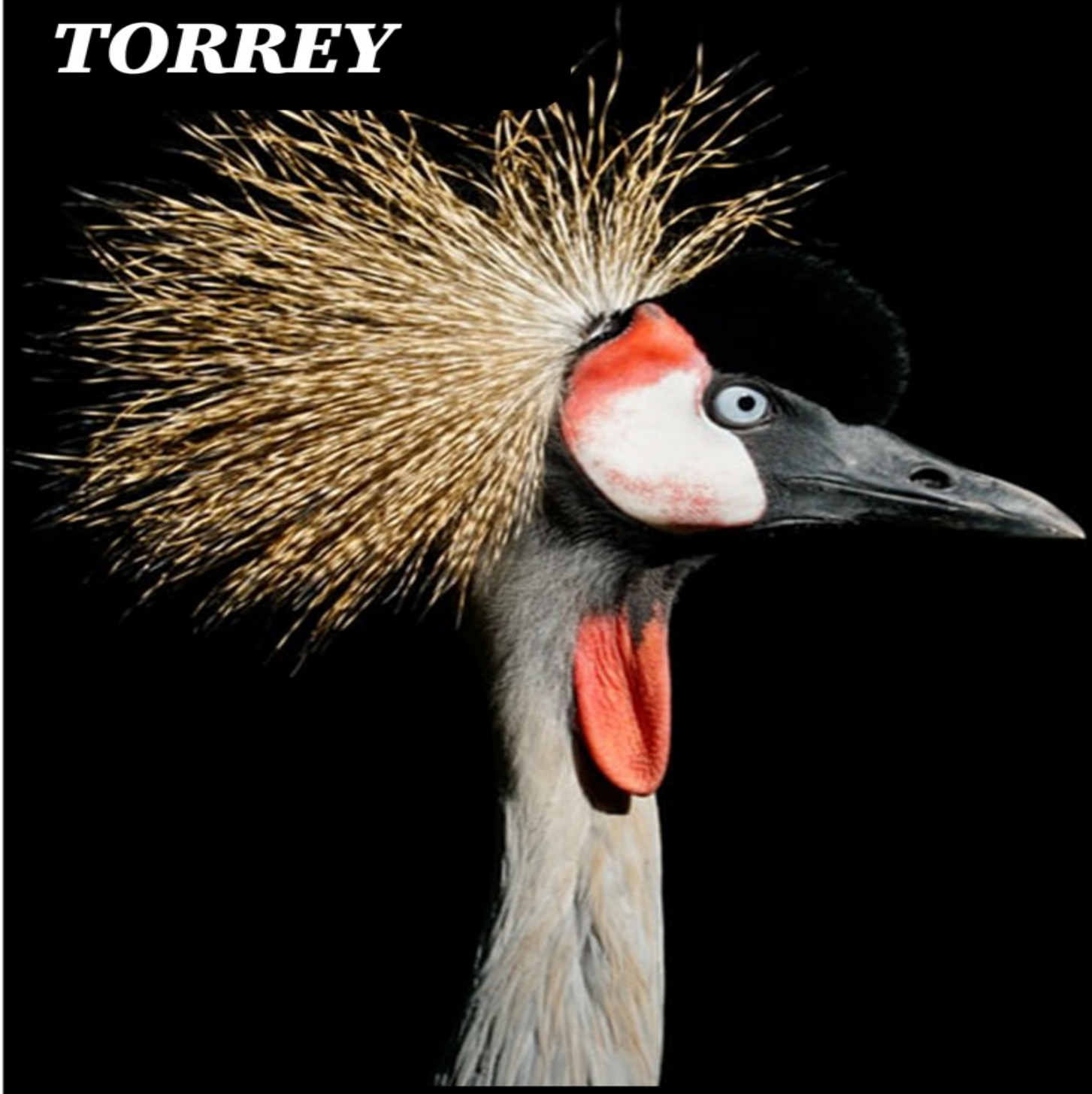
BRADFORD TORREY



THE FOOT-PATH WAY

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"Herbs, fruits, and flowers,
Walks, and the melody of birds."
MILTON.

There were six of us, and we had the entire hotel, I may almost say the entire valley, to ourselves. If the verdict of the villagers could have been taken, we should, perhaps, have been voted a queer set, familiar as dwellers in Franconia are with the sight of idle tourists—

"Rapid and gay, as if the earth were air,
And they were butterflies to wheel about
Long as the summer lasted."

We were neither "rapid" nor "gay," and it was still only the first week of June; if we were summer boarders, therefore, we must be of some unusual early-blooming variety.

First came a lady, in excellent repute among the savants of Europe and America as an entomologist, but better known to the general public as a writer of stories. With her, as companion and assistant, was a doctor of laws, who is also a newspaper proprietor, a voluminous author, an art connoisseur, and many things beside. They had turned their backs thus unseasonably upon the metropolis, and in this pleasant out-of-the-way corner were devoting themselves to one absorbing pursuit—the pursuit of moths. On their daily drives, two or three insect nets dangled conspicuously from the carriage—the footman, thrifty soul, was never backward to take a hand—and evening after evening the hotel piazza was illuminated till midnight with lamps and lanterns, while these enthusiasts waved the same white nets about, gathering in geometries, noctuids, sphinges, and Heaven knows what else, all of them to perish painlessly in numerous "cyanide bottles," which bestrewed the piazza by

night, and (happy thought!) the closed piano by day. In this noble occupation I sometimes played at helping; but with only meagre success, my most brilliant catch being nothing more important than a "beautiful Io." The kind-hearted lepidopterist lingered with gracious emphasis upon the adjective, and assured me that the specimen would be all the more valuable because of a finger-mark which my awkwardness had left upon one of its wings. So—to the credit of human nature be it spoken—so does amiability sometimes get the better of the feminine scientific spirit. To the credit of human nature, I say; for, though her practice of the romancer's art may doubtless have given to this good lady some peculiar flexibility of mind, some special, individual facility in subordinating a lower truth to a higher, it surely may be affirmed, also, of humanity in general, that few things become it better than its inconsistencies.

Of the four remaining members of the company, two were botanists, and two—for the time—ornithologists. But the botanists were lovers of birds, also, and went nowhere without opera-glasses; while the ornithologists, in turn, did not hold themselves above some elementary knowledge of plants, and amused themselves with now and then pointing out some rarity—sedges and willows were the special desiderata—which the professional collectors seemed in danger of passing without notice. All in all, we *were* a queer set. How the Latin and Greek polysyllables flew about the dining-room, as we recounted our forenoon's or afternoon's discoveries! Somebody remarked once that the waiters' heads appeared to be more or less in danger; but if the waiters trembled at all, it was probably not for their own heads, but for ours.[1]

[1] Just how far the cause of science was advanced by all this activity I am not prepared to say. The first ornithologist of the party published some time ago (in *The Auk*, vol. v. p.

151) a list of our Franconia birds, and the results of the botanists' researches among the willows have appeared, in part at least, in different numbers of the *Bulletin of the Torrey Botanical Club*. As for the lepidopterist, I have an indistinct recollection that she once wrote to me of having made some highly interesting discoveries among her Franconia collections—several undescribed species, as well as I can now remember; but she added that it would be useless to go into particulars with a correspondent entomologically so ignorant.

Our first excursion—I speak of the four who traveled on foot—was to the Franconia Notch. It could not well have been otherwise; at all events, there was one of the four whose feet would not willingly have carried him in any other direction. The mountains drew us, and there was no thought of resisting their attraction.

Love and curiosity are different, if not incompatible, sentiments; and the birds that are dearest to the man are, for that very reason, not most interesting to the ornithologist. When on a journey, I am almost without eyes or ears for bluebirds and robins, song sparrows and chickadees. Now is my opportunity for extending my acquaintance, and such every-day favorites must get along for the time as best they can without my attention. So it was here in Franconia. The vesper sparrow, the veery, and a host of other friends were singing about the hotel and along the roadside, but we heeded them not. Our case was like the boy's who declined gingerbread, when on a visit: he had plenty of that at home.

When we were nearly at the edge of the mountain woods, however, we heard across the field a few notes that brought all four of us to an instant standstill. What warbler could that be? Nobody could tell. In fact, nobody could guess. But,

before the youngest of us could surmount the wall, the singer took wing, flew over our heads far into the woods, and all was silent. It was too bad; but there would be another day to-morrow. Meantime, we kept on up the hill, and soon were in the old forest, listening to bay-breasted warblers, Blackburnians, black-polls, and so on, while the noise of the mountain brook on our right, a better singer than any of them, was never out of our ears. "You are going up," it said. "I wish you joy. But you see how it is; you will soon have to come down again."

I took leave of my companions at Profile Lake, they having planned an all-day excursion beyond, and started homeward by myself. Slowly, and with many stops, I sauntered down the long hill, through the forest (the stops, I need not say, are commonly the major part of a naturalist's ramble—the golden beads, as it were, the walk itself being only the string), till I reached the spot where we had been serenaded in the morning by our mysterious stranger. Yes, he was again singing, this time not far from the road, in a moderately thick growth of small trees, under which the ground was carpeted with club-mosses, dog-tooth violets, clintonia, linnæa, and similar plants. He continued to sing, and I continued to edge my way nearer and nearer, till finally I was near enough, and went down on my knees. Then I saw him, facing me, showing white under parts. A Tennessee warbler! Here was good luck indeed. I ogled him for a long time ("Shoot it," says Mr. Burroughs, authoritatively, "not ogle it with a glass;" but a man must follow his own method), impatient to see his back, and especially the top of his head. What a precious frenzy we fall into at such moments! My knees were fairly upon nettles. He flew, and I followed. Once more he was under the glass, but still facing me. How like a vireo he looked! For one instant I thought, Can it be the Philadelphia vireo? But, though I had never seen that bird, I knew its song to be as

different as possible from the notes to which I was listening. After a long time the fellow turned to feeding, and now I obtained a look at his upper parts—the back olive, the head ashy, like the Nashville warbler. That was enough. It was indeed the Tennessee (*Helminthophila peregrina*), a bird for which I had been ten years on the watch.

The song, which has not often been described, is more suggestive of the Nashville's than of any other, but so decidedly different as never for a moment to be confounded with it. "When you hear it," a friend had said to me several years before, "you will know it for something new." It is long (I speak comparatively, of course), very sprightly, and peculiarly staccato, and is made up of two parts, the second quicker in movement and higher in pitch than the first. I speak of it as in two parts, though when my companions came to hear it, as they did the next day, they reported it as in three. We visited the place together afterwards, and the discrepancy was readily explained. As to pitch, the song *is* in three parts, but as to rhythm and character, it is in two; the first half being composed of double notes, the second of single notes. The resemblance to the Nashville's song lies entirely in the first part; the notes of the concluding portion are not run together or jumbled, after the Nashville's manner, but are quite as distinct as those of the opening measure.

As there were at least two pairs of the birds, and they were unmistakably at home, we naturally had hope of finding one of the nests. We made several random attempts, and one day I devoted an hour or more to a really methodical search; but the wily singer gave me not the slightest clue, behaving as if there were no such thing as a bird's nest within a thousand miles, and all my endeavors went for nothing.

As might have been foreseen, Franconia proved to be an excellent place in which to study the difficult family of flycatchers. All our common eastern Massachusetts species were present—the kingbird, the phoebe, the wood pewee, and the least flycatcher—and with them the crested flycatcher (not common), the olive-sided, the traill, and the yellow-bellied. The phoebe-like cry of the traill was to be heard constantly from the hotel piazza. The yellow-bellied seemed to be confined to deep and rather swampy woods in the valley, and to the mountain-side forests; being most numerous on Mount Lafayette, where it ran well up toward the limit of trees. In his notes, the yellow-belly may be said to take after both the least flycatcher and the wood pewee. His *killic* (so written in the books, and I do not know how to improve upon it) resembles the *chebec* of the least flycatcher, though much less emphatic, as well as much less frequently uttered, while his *twee*, or *tuwee*, is quite in the voice and manner of the wood pewee's clear, plaintive whistle; usually a monosyllable, but at other times almost or quite dissyllabic. The olive-sided, on the other hand, imitates nobody; or, if he does, it must be some bird with which I have yet to make acquaintance. *Que-qúe-o* he vociferates, with a strong emphasis and drawl upon the middle syllable. This is his song, or what answers to a song, but I have seen him when he would do nothing but repeat incessantly a quick trisyllabic call, *whit, whit, whit*; corresponding, I suppose, to the well-known *whit* with which the phoebe sometimes busies himself in a similar manner.

Of more interest than any flycatcher—of more interest even than the Tennessee warbler—was a bird found by the roadside in the village, after we had been for several days in the place. Three of us were walking together, talking by the way, when all at once we halted, as by a common impulse, at the sound of a vireo song; a red-eye's song, as it seemed, with the faintest touch of something unfamiliar about it. The

singer was in a small butternut-tree close upon the sidewalk, and at once afforded us perfectly satisfactory observations, perching on a low limb within fifteen feet of our eyes, and singing again and again, while we scrutinized every feather through our glasses. As one of my companions said, it was like having the bird in your hand. There was no room for a question as to its identity. At last we had before us the rare and long-desired Philadelphia greenlet. As its song is little known, I here transcribe my notes about it, made at two different times, between which there appears to have been some discussion among us as to just how it should be characterized:—

"The song is very pretty, and is curiously compounded of the red-eye's and the solitary's, both as to phrase and quality. The measures are all brief; with fewer syllables, that is to say, than the red-eye commonly uses. Some of them are exactly like the red-eye's, while others have the peculiar sweet upward inflection of the solitary's. To hear some of the measures, you would pass the bird for a red-eye; to hear others of them, you might pass him for a solitary. At the same time, he has not the most highly characteristic of the solitary's phrases. His voice is less sharp and his accent less emphatic than the red-eye's, and, so far as we heard, he observes decidedly longer rests between the measures."

This is under date of June 16th. On the following day I made another entry:—

"The song is, I think, less varied than either the solitary's or the red-eye's, but it grows more distinct from both as it is longer heard. Acquaintance will probably make it as characteristic and unmistakable as any of our four other vireo songs. But I do not withdraw what I said yesterday about its resemblance to the red-eye's and the solitary's. The bird seems quite fearless, and keeps much of the time

in the lower branches. In this latter respect his habit is in contrast with that of the warbling vireo."

On the whole, then, the song of the Philadelphia vireo comes nearest to the red-eye's, differing from it mainly in tone and inflection rather than in form. In these two respects it suggests the solitary vireo, though it never reproduces the indescribably sweet cadence, the real "dying fall," of that most delightful songster. At the risk of a seeming contradiction, however, I must mention one curious circumstance. On going again to Franconia, a year afterwards, and, naturally, keeping my ears open for *Vireo philadelphicus*, I discovered that I was never for a moment in doubt when I heard a red-eye; but once, on listening to a distant solitary—catching only part of the strain—I was for a little quite uncertain whether he might not be the bird for which I was looking. How this fact is to be explained I am unable to say; it will be least surprising to those who know most of such matters, and at all events I think it worth recording as affording a possible clue to some future observer. The experience, inconsistent as the assertion may sound, does not in the least alter my opinion that the Philadelphia's song is practically certain to be confused with the red-eye's rather than with the solitary's. Upon that point my companions and I were perfectly agreed while we had the bird before us, and Mr. Brewster's testimony is abundantly conclusive to the same effect. He was in the Umbagog forests on a special hunt for Philadelphia vireos (he had collected specimens there on two previous occasions), and after some days of fruitless search discovered, almost by accident, that the birds had all the while been singing close about him, but in every instance had passed for "nothing but red-eyes."[2]

[2] *Bulletin of the Nuttall Ornithological Club*, vol. v. p. 3.

For the benefit of the lay reader, I ought, perhaps, to have explained before this that the Philadelphia vireo is in coloration an exact copy of the warbling vireo. There is a slight difference in size between the two, but the most practiced eye could not be depended upon to tell them apart in a tree. *Vireo philadelphicus* is in a peculiar case: it looks like one common bird, and sings like another. It might have been invented on purpose to circumvent collectors, as the Almighty has been supposed by some to have created fossils on purpose to deceive ungodly geologists. It is not surprising, therefore, that the bird escaped the notice of the older ornithologists. In fact, it was first described—by Mr. Cassin—in 1851, from a specimen taken, nine years before, near Philadelphia; and its nest remained unknown for more than thirty years longer, the first one having been discovered, apparently in Canada, in 1884.[3]

[3] E. E. T. Seton, in *The Auk*, vol. ii. p. 305.

Day after day, the bare, sharp crest of Mount Lafayette silently invited my feet. Then came a bright, favorable morning, and I set out. I would go alone on this my first pilgrimage to the noble peak, at which, always from too far off, I had gazed longingly for ten summers. It is not inconsistent with a proper regard for one's fellows, I trust, to enjoy now and then being without their society. It *is* good, sometimes, for a man to be alone—especially on a mountain-top, and more especially at a first visit. The trip to the summit was some seven or eight miles in length, and an almost continual ascent, without a dull step in the whole distance. The Tennessee warbler was singing; but perhaps the pleasantest incident of the walk to the Profile House—in front of which the mountain footpath is taken—was a Blackburnian warbler perched, as usual, at the very top of a tall spruce, his orange throat flashing fire as he faced the sun, and his song, as my notebook expresses it, "sliding up

to high *Z* at the end" in his quaintest and most characteristic fashion. I spent nearly three hours in climbing the mountain path, and during all that time saw and heard only twelve kinds of birds: redstarts, Canada warblers (near the base), black-throated blues, black-throated greens, Nashvilles, black-polls, red-eyed vireos, snowbirds (no white-throated sparrows!), winter wrens, Swainson and gray-cheeked thrushes, and yellow-bellied flycatchers. Black-poll and Nashville warblers were especially numerous, as they are also upon Mount Washington, and, as far as I have seen, upon the White Mountains generally. The feeble, sharp song of the black-poll is a singular affair; short and slight as it is, it embraces a perfect crescendo and a perfect decrescendo. Without question I passed plenty of white-throated sparrows, but by some coincidence not one of them announced himself. The gray-cheeked thrushes, which sang freely, were not heard till I was perhaps halfway between the Eagle Cliff Notch and the Eagle Lakes. This species, so recently added to our summer fauna, proves to be not uncommon in the mountainous parts of New England, though apparently confined to the spruce forests at or near the summits. I found it abundant on Mount Mansfield, Vermont, in 1885, and in the summer of 1888 Mr. Walter Faxon surprised us all by shooting a specimen on Mount Graylock, Massachusetts. Doubtless the bird has been singing its perfectly distinctive song in the White Mountain woods ever since the white man first visited them. During the vernal migration, indeed, I have more than once heard it sing in eastern Massachusetts. My latest delightful experience of this kind was on the 29th of May last (1889), while I was hastening to a railway train within the limits of Boston. Preoccupied as I was, and faintly as the notes came to me, I recognized them instantly; for while the gray-cheek's song bears an evident resemblance to the veery's (which I had heard within five minutes), the two are so unlike in pitch and rhythm that no reasonably nice ear ought

ever to confound them. The bird was just over the high, close, inhospitable fence, on the top of which I rested my chin and watched and listened. He sat with his back toward me, in full view, on a level with my eye, and sang and sang and sang, in a most deliciously soft, far-away voice, keeping his wings all the while a little raised and quivering, as in a kind of musical ecstasy. It does seem a thing to be regretted—yes, a thing to be ashamed of—that a bird so beautiful, so musical, so romantic in its choice of a dwelling-place, and withal so characteristic of New England should be known, at a liberal estimate, to not more than one or two hundred New Englanders! But if a bird wishes general recognition, he should do as the robin does, and the bluebird, and the oriole—dress like none of his neighbors, and show himself freely in the vicinity of men's houses. How can one expect to be famous unless he takes a little pains to keep himself before the public?

From the time I left my hotel until I was fairly above the dwarf spruces below the summit of Lafayette, I was never for many minutes together out of the hearing of thrush music. Four of our five summer representatives of the genus *Turdus* took turns, as it were, in the serenade. The veeries—Wilson's thrushes—greeted me before I stepped off the piazza. As I neared the Profile House farm, the hermits were in tune on either hand. The moment the road entered the ancient forest, the olive-backs began to make themselves heard, and halfway up the mountain path the gray-cheeks took up the strain and carried it on to its heavenly conclusion. A noble processional! Even a lame man might have climbed to such music. If the wood thrush had been here, the chorus would have been complete—a chorus not to be excelled, according to my untraveled belief, in any quarter of the world.

To-day, however, my first thoughts were not of birds, but of the mountain. The weather was all that could be asked—the temperature perfect, and the atmosphere so transparent as to be of itself a kind of lens; so that in the evening, when I rejoined my companions at the hotel, I found to my astonishment that I had been plainly visible while at the summit, the beholders having no other help than an opera-glass! It was almost past belief. I had felt some dilation of soul, it was true, but had been quite unconscious of any corresponding physical transformation. What would our aboriginal forerunners have said could they have stood in the valley and seen a human form moving from point to point along yonder sharp, serrated ridge? I should certainly have passed for a god! Let us be thankful that all such superstitious fancies have had their day. The Indian, poor child of nature,

"A pagan suckled in a creed outworn,"

stood afar off and worshiped toward these holy hills; but the white man clambers gayly up their sides, guide-book in hand, and leaves his sardine box and eggshells—and likely enough his business card—at the top. Let us be thankful, I repeat, for the light vouchsafed to us; ours is a goodly heritage; but there are moods—such creatures of hereditary influence are we—wherein I would gladly exchange both the guide-book and the sardine box for a vision, never so indistinct and transient, of Kitche Manitoo. Alas! what a long time it is since any of us have been able to see the invisible. "In the mountains," says Wordsworth, "did he feel his faith." But the poet was speaking then of a very old-fashioned young fellow, who, even when he grew up, made nothing but a peddler. Had he lived in our day, he would have felt not his faith, but his own importance; especially if he had put himself out of breath, as most likely he would have done, in accomplishing in an hour and forty minutes what,